

A BENEFIT AUCTION PLANNING RESOURCE

THE COMPLETE GALA PLANNING GUIDE

A 12-month, month-by-month roadmap for nonprofit and school committees planning a fundraising gala or benefit auction — from first committee meeting to post-event thank-yous.

12 MONTHS OF TASKS & DELIVERABLES

COMMITTEE ROLES · FUNDRAISING TIMELINE · EVENT-NIGHT RUN OF SHOW



**A PLUS BENEFIT
AUCTIONS**

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

A great gala isn't built in the final six weeks — it's built over a year of deliberate, well-sequenced decisions. This guide breaks that year into clear phases, each with a short list of tasks and the concrete deliverable your committee should have in hand by the end of it.

WHO THIS IS FOR

Nonprofit fundraising committees, school PTA/PTO auction chairs, and any organization planning a gala, benefit auction, or fund-a-need event for the first time — or looking to tighten up how they run it.

HOW IT'S ORGANIZED

Each phase lists the key tasks on the left and the deliverable(s) — the specific outcome that phase should produce — in the box on the right. Work through it in order; later phases build on earlier ones.

ADAPT IT TO YOUR EVENT

Timelines here reflect common practice across nonprofit galas and benefit auctions. A smaller event can compress this; a first-time 300+ guest gala should use the full runway.

THE YEAR AT A GLANCE

TIMEFRAME	FOCUS	KEY DELIVERABLE
12–11 Months	Lay the Foundation	Committee formed, preliminary budget & goal set, venue shortlist built
10–9 Months	Lock In the Big Decisions	Venue signed, pricing set, auctioneer booked, fund-a-need cause chosen
8–7 Months	Open the Doors to Giving	Item procurement underway, entertainment booked, save-the-date sent
6–5 Months	Build the Program	Auction platform selected, run-of-show drafted, volunteers recruited
4–3 Months	Get the Word Out	Invitations sent, ticket sales open, marketing live, vendors confirmed
2–1 Months	Finalize Every Detail	Headcount confirmed, catalog complete, run-of-show distributed
Final 2 Weeks	Get Event-Ready	Walkthrough complete, volunteers briefed, technology tested
Event Day	Show Time	Run of show executed, funds raised, guests thanked in the room
Post-Event	Turn One Night Into Next Year	Thank-yous sent, financials reconciled, debrief documented

Lay the Foundation

Before anything else is decided, get the right people in the room and agree on what success looks like. Decisions made here shape every phase that follows.

KEY TASKS

- ☐ Form your gala committee and name a chair; recruit a diverse group of staff, board members, and volunteers
- ☐ Define subcommittee roles: procurement, sponsorship, marketing, logistics, and volunteer management
- ☐ Review last year's results if applicable — revenue, costs, attendance, and what worked or didn't
- ☐ Set a preliminary net revenue goal and draft a budget framework, including a 10–15% contingency buffer
- ☐ Choose your event date and check community and nonprofit calendars for scheduling conflicts
- ☐ Tour and shortlist 2–3 venues sized for your expected headcount
- ☐ Begin discussing event theme and format — seated dinner vs. cocktail-style, live auction vs. silent-only
- ☐ Start researching benefit auctioneers and request availability — sought-after, BAS-certified auctioneers book up 9–12 months out, just like top venues

DELIVERABLES BY END OF PHASE

- ✓ Committee roster with a named chair and subcommittee leads
- ✓ Draft net revenue goal and budget framework
- ✓ Shortlist of 2–3 candidate venues
- ✓ Shortlist of 2–3 candidate benefit auctioneers, availability requested

WHY IT MATTERS

Popular venues — and in-demand benefit auctioneers — for Saturday evenings often book 9–12 months out. Starting both searches now is what protects every date-dependent decision later.

01

Lock In the Big Decisions

This is where your event stops being an idea and becomes a plan on paper. Contracts get signed, pricing gets set, and your auctioneer comes on board early enough to actually shape the night.

KEY TASKS

- ☐ Sign your venue contract and pay the deposit; confirm date, start/end times, and capacity
- ☐ Finalize your event format and decide whether you'll run a live auction, silent auction, or both
- ☐ Set ticket price and table/sponsorship tier structure based on your revenue goal
- ☐ Build your sponsorship prospect list and assign top asks to board members with existing relationships
- ☐ Finalize your choice and book your benefit auctioneer — early involvement shapes item strategy and the run of show, not just event night
- ☐ Identify your fund-a-need (paddle raise) cause and set an initial goal for that appeal

DELIVERABLES BY END OF PHASE

- ✓ Signed venue contract with deposit paid
- ✓ Ticket and table pricing finalized
- ✓ Benefit auctioneer booked
- ✓ Fund-a-need cause identified

WHY IT MATTERS

A benefit auctioneer brought in this early can help structure your revenue plan and item strategy — not just show up to call the auction on event night.

02

Open the Doors to Giving

Item procurement and sponsorship outreach both take longer than committees expect. Starting now gives you room to be selective rather than desperate in month two.

KEY TASKS

- ☐ Launch live and silent auction item procurement; assign committee members specific categories and targets
- ☐ Send donation request letters or forms to businesses, alumni networks, and individual donors
- ☐ Prioritize 3-5 premium "money items" — travel packages, exclusive experiences — to anchor the live auction
- ☐ Review your procurement list with your auctioneer — they can flag which items will move a room and which won't
- ☐ Book entertainment: live band or DJ, and a photographer if budget allows
- ☐ Begin active sponsorship outreach to top prospects; aim to have roughly 65% of your sponsorship goal committed before invitations go out
- ☐ Send a save-the-date or "hold the date" announcement to your community

DELIVERABLES BY END OF PHASE

- ✓ Procurement targets assigned and actively underway
- ✓ Auctioneer feedback incorporated into item strategy
- ✓ Entertainment and photographer booked
- ✓ Save-the-date sent to your full list

WHY IT MATTERS

A well-balanced catalog needs items at every price point, but only a handful of premium "money items" drive disproportionate live-auction revenue — your auctioneer has seen which types sell and can help you find those first.

03

Build the Program

You're at the midpoint. This phase is about turning a list of donated items and a signed venue into an actual evening — a program, a technology stack, and a trained team.

KEY TASKS

- ☐ Check progress against targets: sponsorship should be at 50–65% of goal, procurement at least halfway complete
- ☐ Choose your event technology platform for ticketing, mobile bidding, and check-in
- ☐ Map your program run-of-show: cocktail hour, dinner, mission moment, fund-a-need, live auction, closing
- ☐ Build the run-of-show and fund-a-need giving levels together with your auctioneer — this is where their experience should directly shape your program
- ☐ Decide your live auction lot count (typically 4–6 items) with your auctioneer's input
- ☐ Design invitations and the event program or auction catalog
- ☐ Recruit volunteers for check-in, bid-spotting, greeting, and auction/checkout support, and begin training

DELIVERABLES BY END OF PHASE

- ✓ Auction/event technology platform selected
- ✓ Draft run-of-show in place, reviewed with your auctioneer
- ✓ Invitation design finalized
- ✓ Volunteer roles defined and recruiting underway

WHY IT MATTERS

More than 4–6 live auction items tends to drain a room's energy. A tighter, higher-quality lot list — curated with your auctioneer — outperforms a long one.

04

Get the Word Out

Everything built so far now goes public. This is the phase where your guest list turns into ticket sales and your community starts feeling the momentum.

KEY TASKS

- ☐ Print and send invitations to your full list
- ☐ Open ticket and table sales — board members and major donors first, then the general community
- ☐ Publish sponsorship packages publicly and confirm any remaining sponsor commitments
- ☐ Launch full marketing: email campaigns, social media, press releases, and community calendars
- ☐ Feature your benefit auctioneer's name and credentials in marketing and invitations — a named, certified professional adds credibility that helps sell tickets
- ☐ Finalize décor, theme details, and your venue floor plan
- ☐ Confirm all vendor contracts and deposits — caterer, AV, rentals, florist

DELIVERABLES BY END OF PHASE

- ✓ Invitations sent to full list
- ✓ Ticket and table sales open
- ✓ Marketing campaign live across channels
- ✓ Vendor contracts and deposits confirmed

WHY IT MATTERS

Selling to board members and major donors first builds early momentum — a partially-filled room at public launch reads very differently than an empty one.

05

Finalize Every Detail

The big decisions are behind you. Now it's a matter of closing every loop — headcounts, catalog details, and making sure everyone on your team is working from the same document.

KEY TASKS

- ☐ Track RSVPs closely and personally follow up on outstanding invitations
- ☐ Finalize the auction catalog: descriptions, fair market values, photos, and opening bids (roughly 30-40% of fair market value)
- ☐ Confirm your live auction lot order with your auctioneer — pacing from item to item is part of what drives momentum
- ☐ Confirm final headcount and meal counts with your caterer
- ☐ Print programs, bid sheets, signage, and table or place cards
- ☐ Distribute a detailed, timestamped run-of-show to every vendor, volunteer, and your auctioneer
- ☐ Schedule a walkthrough or rehearsal with your auctioneer and emcee to align on timing and transitions

DELIVERABLES BY END OF PHASE

- ✓ Final headcount confirmed with caterer
- ✓ Auction catalog complete and entered into your platform
- ✓ Run-of-show distributed to the full team

WHY IT MATTERS

A run-of-show that's timed to the minute will still run over. Build 5-10 minutes of flex time around your live auction and fund-a-need segments.

06

Get Event-Ready

The plan is complete. This stretch is about rehearsal and readiness — making sure every person and every system has been tested before your guests walk in.

KEY TASKS

- ☐ Confirm final vendor arrival times, load-in windows, and delivery schedule — including your auctioneer's arrival
- ☐ Brief every volunteer in person on their role and the chain of command for handling problems — email alone doesn't stick
- ☐ Complete a full venue walkthrough: décor placement, AV and technology testing, seating chart confirmed
- ☐ Confirm sound and staging needs with your auctioneer — a wireless mic and clear sightlines matter more than most committees expect
- ☐ Test your bidding, check-in, and payment technology end-to-end before event day
- ☐ Prepare check-in stations with clear signage and staff assignments; plan for 1 volunteer per 50 guests at check-in
- ☐ Confirm transportation, parking, and coat-check logistics for guests

DELIVERABLES BY END OF PHASE

- ✓ Venue walkthrough completed
- ✓ All volunteers briefed in person
- ✓ Technology tested end-to-end
- ✓ Final day-of timeline distributed to the whole team

WHY IT MATTERS

Always print a paper copy of the program and run-of-show as backup. If AV or technology fails, your night still needs to run on schedule.

07

Show Time

A sample run-of-show for a typical gala evening. Adjust timing to your own program, but keep the sequence — the mission moment leading directly into your fund-a-need and live auction is what drives giving.

TIME	SEGMENT
6:00 PM	Doors open — cocktail hour and silent auction browsing begins
7:00 PM	Welcome remarks and dinner service
8:00 PM	Mission moment — a short video or live story connecting guests to your cause
8:10 PM	Fund-a-need / paddle raise appeal
8:40 PM	Live auction (4–6 items)
9:00 PM	Closing remarks — recognize committee, sponsors, and guests
9:10 PM	Dancing begins; silent auction closes
9:15–9:45 PM	Checkout and departure — payment stations, valet, parting gifts

DAY-OF REMINDERS

- ✓ Staff should be at their stations 30–45 minutes before doors open
- ✓ Greet guests by name at check-in whenever possible — it sets the tone for the night
- ✓ Stagger the silent auction close (close half the catalog 15 minutes early) to build final-bidding urgency
- ✓ Place the mission moment immediately before the fund-a-need and live auction — emotional connection drives giving

IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG

Late caterer: extend cocktail hour and move the mission moment up. Speaker no-show: have a board member ready with a backup story. AV failure: fall back to your printed program and run-of-show.

Turn One Night Into Next Year

What happens in the weeks after your gala determines whether it was a single great night or the start of stronger, longer-term donor relationships.

WITHIN 48 HOURS

- ☐ Send thank-you notes or emails to attendees, sponsors, donors, and volunteers — don't let this wait
- ☐ Post a brief thank-you and event recap on social media and your website

WITHIN 1–2 WEEKS

- ☐ Process final payments and reconcile financials against your original goal and budget
- ☐ Send tax-deduction and donation receipts for auction purchases, sponsorships, and table sales
- ☐ Fulfill sponsor benefit obligations that extend past the event (annual report recognition, etc.)

WITHIN 30 DAYS

- ☐ Hold a committee debrief meeting while the event is still fresh — the people closest to it have the clearest view of what to change
- ☐ Ask your auctioneer for their read on the night — what the room responded to, and what to adjust next year
- ☐ Document lessons learned and specific recommendations for next year
- ☐ Update your donor database with new contacts, giving history, and engagement notes
- ☐ Open a planning file for next year's event with this year's numbers and notes attached

DELIVERABLES

- ✓ Thank-yous sent within 48 hours of the event
- ✓ Financials fully reconciled against goal and budget
- ✓ Written debrief and recommendations filed for next year's committee

WHY BRING IN A PROFESSIONAL BENEFIT AUCTIONEER

Anyone can stand in front of a room and ask for money. A certified Benefit Auctioneer Specialist is trained specifically to maximize what that room gives — through pacing, reading bidders, and a fund-a-need appeal built to land — while giving your committee back the hours it takes to plan, procure, and run the night well.

WHAT A PLUS BRINGS

Unlimited pre-event consultation, live-item ordering strategy, sound and timeline planning, bid-spotter training, and a fund-a-need appeal designed around your specific cause — not a generic script.

A DIFFERENT VANTAGE POINT

Dr. Ben Gonzales holds the Benefit Auctioneer Specialist (BAS) designation through the National Auctioneers Association — held by only about 3% of auctioneers nationwide. He also spent his career in education, as a teacher, vice-principal, and principal, giving him a genuine understanding of how schools and nonprofits actually work.



READY TO TALK THROUGH YOUR EVENT?

Call (408) 601-0663 or email ben@aplusbenefitauctions.com — no forms, just a conversation about your goals. · aplusbenefitauctions.com